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Protestant Ecumenism and Theology in China Since Edinburgh 1910 by Alexander Chow¹

Ecumenical theology traditionally focuses on clarifying diverse opinions on core matters of the faith. But from its inception in China, ecumenism has been heavily influenced by its sociopolitical concerns. This article explores ecumenism's goal of church unity in Chinese Protestantism since Edinburgh 1910. Two early attempts sought to speak to the concerns of foreign denominationalism and imperialism. In the 1980s, a third attempt occurred within the government-sanctioned church. This would be complicated by the prevalence of house churches and theological studies among secular academics. How does this trifurcation of Christian activity affect the goals of Chinese Protestant ecumenism?

Introduction

Robert Morrison was the first Protestant missionary to China in 1807. Though his efforts saw few converts, Morrison inaugurated an enterprise that came into full force during the so-called “Opium Wars” of the mid- to late-19th century. Missionaries would then enter China on the heels of war and conquest, and foreign powers began using bilingual missionaries and converts as translators. Hence, at an early stage, Christianity was seen as a partner of imperialism. In 1900, the Boxer Rebellion waged a war against imperialism and Christianity, leading to the death of several hundred foreign missionaries and tens of thousands of Chinese Christians – the latter of whom were treated as traitors (Latourette 1929:501-519). Since the Chinese government was unwilling and unable to control the situation, eight foreign nations brought military forces together and

¹ The author is a Ph.D. candidate in Theology at the University of Birmingham, England. He has previously written on the Christology of Bishop K. H. Ting, Sino-Christian Theology and Eastern Orthodoxy.

successfully suppressed the uprising, reinforcing the perceived alliance between the faith and the gun.

In the early 1900s, another concern involved the number of foreign missionaries in China. In 1889, there were 1,296 Protestant missionaries in China; by 1910, this quadrupled to 5,144 (Latourette 1929:606). The growth in foreign workers led to an unwillingness of missionaries to raise up indigenous leadership. When locals did exist in the hierarchy, they were often subordinated under their foreign counterparts. Additionally, denominational disputes and schisms from the West made little sense in the Chinese context. In some cases this included doctrinal differences like views on the sabbath and modes of baptism and communion. But idiosyncrasies were also seen in the translation of the Bible where translators could not agree on how to render important words like “God.” Protestants tended to uphold two Chinese equivalents, Shen and Shangdi,² resulting in the publication of two respective Chinese Bibles that differed only in the translation of this one word; moreover, Chinese Catholics preferred a third alternative, Tianzhu. Overall, these differences were confusing and went against millennia of Chinese teachings on the value of harmonious relationships. Chinese Protestants saw such disparities as alien to the gospel and stumbling blocks for evangelism.

² Certain names and terms have historical significance using older romanization systems and may be used in this article followed by pinyin in parenthesis. In all other scenarios, preference shall be given to pinyin.

Against this backdrop of an imperialistic, suppressive and divisive Christianity, 28 year old Cheng Ching-yi (Cheng Jingyi) delivered a momentous speech as one of three Chinese delegates to attend Edinburgh 1910: “[Chinese Christians] hope to see, in the near future, a united Christian Church without any denominational distinctions.... Speaking generally, denominationalism has never interested the Chinese mind. He finds no delight in it, but sometimes he suffers for it!” (World Missionary Conference 1910:196) In seven minutes, Cheng captured the sentiments held by many Chinese Christians of his day: China needs a unified church, independent of foreign denominationalism.

Ecumenism is generally understood as a process by which Christians of differing ecclesiastical and theological dispositions come together in bilateral or multilateral discussions to explain, understand and engender a “visible unity” in the church (Lossky 1991:986-988, 1041-1043). Sometimes this happens in federations or councils of churches that, while maintaining their differences, are able to work together. Other times the process involves building a regional or national church body where denominational identities are done away with. Often, ecumenical engagement requires theological discussions and debates to identify convergences and divergences on divisive concerns of the faith. It is through this process that various church councils have formulated statements like the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed and the WCC document “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry.” However, ecumenism in Chinese Protestantism has largely been

influenced by a need to address the sociopolitical problems of its day – an expression of contextual theology.

Ecumenism or Independence?

During the half century after Edinburgh, Chinese Protestants made two attempts at ecumenism. In the first, a continuation committee was created to follow through on the events of the Edinburgh conference. This would eventually lead to the creation of supra-denominational coalitions like the National Christian Council and Church of Christ in China. Composed of a large percentage of China's Protestant communities, these groups served as Sino-foreign liaisons with representation from both Chinese and foreign leadership (Bays 1996:308). The coalitions were seen as the first step in a process whereby Chinese churches could eventually develop into independent entities embracing the Venn-Anderson three-self principles. In essence, the process of ameliorating the past problems of foreign denominationalism had begun.

However, many Chinese Christians did not see these groups as viable options. Most foreign organizations had difficulty with this transition towards independence and continued to maintain a good amount of control on the Chinese churches (Bays 1996:309). Overall, with the exception of perhaps the YMCA, there existed a great deal of foreign paternalism and a steady dependence on foreign financial subsidy. For many Chinese Christians, independence was not

seen as happening in the near future. An additional problem with these coalitions was their theology. During these years of exploration for Chinese ecumenism, China was experiencing an ideological revolution where secular reformers pursued modernity and overthrew ideologies that were deemed unscientific.³ Similarly, prominent coalition leaders like T. C. Chao (Zhao Zichen) and David Z. T. Yui (Yu Richang) aimed to rid Chinese theology of its Western chaff. They spoke in terms of social reconstruction and national salvation, and rejected “unscientific” doctrines like the Trinity and the resurrection.

Other Christians attempted to assert their independence apart from these Sino-foreign alliances (Bays 1996:311-316). Some formed federations like the China Christian Independent Church whose constituent members were former Congregational or Presbyterian congregations that had broken away and developed independently. Others began their own denomination-like movements like the True Jesus Church, the Jesus Family and the Assembly Hall (or “Little Flock”). Still, others worked as independent pastors like Wang Mingdao or traveling evangelists like John Sung (Song Shangjie) and Andrew Gih (Ji Zhiweh). The vast majority of these independent Christians and congregations tended to be theologically conservative and borrowed largely from pietist, dispensational and Pentecostal traditions.

³ Known variably as the “May Fourth Movement” or the “Chinese Enlightenment,” secular revolutionaries looked to the French Enlightenment a century and a half earlier as a model of enlightenment. Like its European antecedent, the Chinese Enlightenment sought to overthrow China’s feudalistic past and create a new culture.

Chinese Protestantism's early search for unity was not only a struggle for ecclesiastical solidarity on theological impasses, but it was also a response to the problems faced in Chinese society – both in terms of foreign presence and internal revolutions. While some saw Sino-foreign, supra-denominational coalitions as vital for Chinese Christianity, others focused on developing their own, independent solutions to foreign denominationalism.

Ecumenism Under the Gun

The second period of Chinese ecumenism was occasioned by the 1949 founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The situation would become much more complicated when the United States and the young PRC engaged one another in military skirmishes on the Korean peninsula and in the Taiwan strait. For many, Christianity's survival depended on asserting the church's independence from Western powers.

A Protestant delegation led by Y. T. Wu (Wu Yaozong), a former YMCA administrator, went to Beijing in 1950 to meet with the Zhou Enlai and other communist officials. They produced the so-called "Christian Manifesto" which solicited the signatures of all Chinese Christians who rejected any partnership with foreign missionaries and nations – although, the only country named was the United States. Then, the infamous Denunciation Movement was introduced in 1951 to weed out any links with imperialism. Though the first targets were

foreign missionaries, Chinese Christians were eventually chided about their loyalties and treated as traitors much like the earlier Boxer Rebellion. By 1954, the Beijing delegation would develop into the core leadership of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) with Wu at its helm.⁴

From its conception, the TSPM formed a close connection between patriotism and ecumenism. All Chinese Christians were questioned about their relationships with foreigners and asked to join the TSPM. Those who did were willing, with varying degrees of reluctance, to align themselves with the new regime. But the uniting efforts had such a strong political undertone that key TSPM leaders were accused of being secret members of the communist party; initiatives like the Christian Manifesto and the TSPM were believed to have been invented by Zhou Enlai himself (Wickeri 1988:130). This would have lasting effects on how some Chinese Christians would perceive the TSPM during the 1950s-1960s and after it was reinstated in the 1980s.

In a famous case, the self-proclaimed fundamentalist Wang Mingdao refused to join the TSPM and lambasted its members as “unbelieving modernists” (Wang 1963). K. H. Ting (Ding Guangxun), an Anglican bishop and a protégé of Y. T. Wu, responded by describing Wang as “filled with hatred for China” and

⁴ The choice of Y. T. Wu as the TSPM head was a bit peculiar. He was not interested in the earlier ecumenical movement and was neither a churchman nor a theologian. However, he was enthusiastic about social change and eventually grew to be sympathetic towards communist ideology. From the perspective of the PRC, Wu was the ideal leader to liaise with Chinese Christians.

implored, “If we are all in favor of anti-imperialism and patriotism, why can we not united [sic]?” (1989:145). Wang, borrowing from the North American fundamentalist-modernist debate, believed unity was impossible due to the theological incompatibility he had with the group.⁵ For Ting, ecumenism was more a matter of agreeing to certain sociopolitical beliefs. Wang would subsequently be imprisoned on charges of being a counterrevolutionary. A similar fate would be in store for others like Watchman Nee (Ni Tuosheng), Jing Dianying and T. C. Chao. The line was drawn: join the patriotic movement or risk persecution and imprisonment.

The PRC eventually ousted all foreigners and, in 1958, required unified worship services (Wickeri 1988:219-227). Hence, despite prevailing differences, Protestant churches of all denominational backgrounds in a given area had to worship together under the same roof. The 65 churches in Beijing were reduced to four; 200 Shanghai congregations were consolidated to a mere 23. Many church workers were relieved of their duties and hundreds of church buildings were reallocated for other uses. No longer were Christians given the choice of unity – it was now forced upon them. In certain areas, local authorities took a

⁵ Ironically, a number of the TSPM leaders like Jia Yuming and Marcus Cheng (Chen Chonggui) could also be described as fundamentalists.

heavy-handed approach to denominational differences; but in most cases, differences remained unresolved.⁶

As with the early 1900s, Protestantism in these latter days was concerned with the church's relationships with foreigners. But in the 1950s-1960s, ecumenical attempts focused more on survival under the new regime than aspiring to reach formalized, ecclesiastical unity. The sociopolitical climate in the PRC demanded Chinese Christians to unify in the name of "patriotism." Many would stop taking part in any Christian community at all. Others continued to meet but did so in secret and in smaller groups. This was a trying time for Chinese Christians. But it would also prepare the way for what would later be known as the "house church" (*jiating jiaohui*) movement. By the beginning of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), all public religious activities came to near extinction.

Ecumenism in the "Post-denominational Era"

Shortly after the end of the Cultural Revolution, the communist government issued a more open policy towards religions and a basic protection for freedom of religious belief. Although the changes still maintained a preferential treatment towards atheism, a "religious fever" (*zongjiao re*) swept through every sector of Chinese society and the number of converts to every

⁶ In regards to the latter, there is the case of the Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, formed through a merger of a dozen seminaries, which would maintain different courses of instruction based on ecclesiastical and theological backgrounds.

religion grew at a staggering rate. In particular, Protestant Christianity saw a greater percentage of growth during this period than any other religion.

“Independence” Revisited

When religious practice was legalized in the 1980s, Protestant Christianity was only allowed to operate under two umbrella organizations: the reinstated TSPM and the newly-formed China Christian Council (CCC). Originally led by K. H. Ting, it is known together as the lianghui. In the 1950s, participation in the TSPM was an option to show one’s nationalism and allegiance to the state. However, in the last three decades, registration has been required for any legal operation at all. With denominational structures in the past and the lianghui as the only official existence, church leaders have declared that the country is finally in a “post-denominational era” (hou zongpai shiqi) – a claim that no other church in the world can make. This new situation cannot be naïvely understood to have achieved the main objectives of ecumenism. Rather, Ting and others have noted that the Chinese church is still working towards the goal of unity (Gu 2008:284-285).

What about the question of independence? In the 1910s-1960s, the main concern of ecumenists was whether the Chinese church could be free from foreign support and control. In the 1980s, denominationalism and foreign domination no longer existed as they previously did. “Independence” became less a subject

involving foreign nations and more about the church's relationship with its own nation. Does the Romans 13 exhortation to subject oneself to the governing authorities apply to communist China? Unlike the 1950s, China was now more open to the international community and the rhetoric of patriotism was no longer a major driving force of the TSPM. Regardless, the official churches and seminaries still have a degree of government-imposed restrictions – although many day-to-day activities have little or no oversight.⁷ Without the lianghui, the government and the church would remain in a Cultural Revolution-era stalemate where the only existence would be an illegal existence. The lianghui has provided a means for the government to interact with Protestants and explore different aspects of religious liberties.

Prevailing Theological Impasses

In the last few decades, lianghui leadership have voiced concerns that the theological composition of its constituent churches causes problems for Christian unity (Bays 2003:494-495). Like the 1950s-1960s, denominational affiliations were no longer present but many of their historical ecclesiastical and theological characteristics still remain. Today, some TSPM congregations have worship

⁷ China has practiced the registration and monitoring of religious activities ever since the Tang dynasty (618-907). This practice continues today largely as a means of management and control (Bays 2003:492). Oddly enough, the PRC also infuses religious activity when deemed necessary. Much later, the government saw it fit for several new TSPM churches to be erected in Beijing in preparation for the 2008 Olympics.

services on Saturdays like former True Jesus Church and Seventh Day Adventist communities. Others gather Sunday evenings for communion as was practiced in Assembly Hall churches. Lianghui officials have lamented that the majority of TSPM congregations continue to maintain a conservatism that emphasizes “obsolete” and “backward” teachings of individual salvation and Christian exclusivism. Such perspectives have been interpreted as hampering the theological progress of the church and her ability to engage the government and the academy.

Though this theological diversity is acknowledged, the lianghui is unable to actively respond because it is not a proper ecclesiastical body. The TSPM serves as an interface for registered churches and offices of the communist party and the government. The CCC is concerned with pastoral matters like training leaders and publishing Bibles, hymnals and other materials. Neither the TSPM nor the CCC have been able to produce any theological statements like historical ecumenical bodies.

While the official Protestant entity since the early 1980s has been the lianghui, arguably the largest number of Chinese Christians during this period has been part of the house church movement (cf. Bays 2003:491). Though described as a “movement,” these churches can hardly be understood as a monolithic group. House churches vary a great deal theologically and organizationally. The one thing that unifies them is that none are registered with the TSPM. Even so,

registered and unregistered churches do not have a clear division. There are often overlapping memberships and informal relationships between the two groups. Some house churches have sought registration; but many have not because they believe there is a ready danger of perverting the gospel by aligning themselves with the government. Would registration hamper the believer's ability to freely worship and obey God? Much like Wang Mingdao, many house church Christians also question the legitimacy of the faith of TSPM Christians.

Generally speaking, most house churches find their origins in the earlier indigenous churches. A good number have historical links to pre-1949 movements like the Assembly Hall and the True Jesus Church. Others arose during the late 1950s in response to the persecution and the unified worship services. Since the Cultural Revolution, there has also been a number of house churches that have developed with so-called "Pentecostal" characteristics, bearing similarities to Chinese folk religions (Tang 2002; Lian 2010:204-232). Whatever the origins, these house churches are often small and composed of older members. Some are autonomous while others are connected through denomination-like networks for training and administration.

While lianghui leadership have tended towards a progressive theology that promotes active engagement with the atheistic government and secular academics, it is somewhat different in these house churches which are found largely in rural and poverty-stricken areas. Most house churches are theologically conservative

and have a disposition towards a more primitivist theology, stressing direct spiritual experience of conversion and supernatural acts of healing and prophecy (Bays 1996:307-316). Though perhaps not as intentional, the theology of these groups is contextualized to the sociological conditions of their surrounding populations by providing supernatural hope and comfort to a dire situation.

Chinese Theology Extra Ecclesiam⁸

While Chinese Christians since the 1980s have been advocating for a greater public voice, this has been primarily occupied by academics studying Christianity in China's secular institutions in what is known as "Sino-Christian theology" (hanyu jidujiao shenxue). During China's reopening in the 1980s, the first generation of these intellectuals explored Christianity for resources to aid in the advancement and transformation of Chinese society and culture and explored Christianity as the spiritual core of Western civilization. A number of this first generation of academics, the so-called "Cultural Christians," studied religion in terms of philosophical, cultural and sociological phenomena (Lai 2011:87-93). Their discourses have primarily been within the secular academy and are managed by the Ministry of Education rather than by the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA). They therefore enjoy different freedoms as compared to lianghui and house church leaders.

⁸ This heading gets its inspiration from Chong Chee Pang's article on this subject (2008) that borrows from Cyprian's aphorism *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*.

During the 1980s and early 1990s, the vast majority of these scholars did not profess any Christian faith at all.⁹ Though some were Christians, few would publicly acknowledge this fact. Unlike in many Western countries, to be a person of faith in communist China can have negative repercussions on one's career and future. There were also those who chose to become Christians and were baptized into the "church of God" rather than any local congregation. One prime example, Liu Xiaofeng, has once described himself and other like-minded academics as part of Troeltsch's "mystical" church. Is ecumenism's goal of a "visible unity" possible with members of a "mystical" church? While many of these scholars are not Christians, a good number are sympathetic to the faith and study theology with great care and respect. They are prolific writers and have been involved in tremendous translation efforts to bring Western theology into the Chinese language, providing a magnificent treasury for Christian clergy and seminary professors who would otherwise have no access due to lack of linguistic training or practice (Pang 2008:102).

Previously in Maoist China, religious studies were part of the atheistic agenda to attack and suppress all religions (He 2008:60-61). Chinese Christians have a justified concern that core elements of the faith may be misunderstood or misrepresented – intentionally or not. Conversely, these scholars have historically

⁹ Can these scholars be described as "theologians" and their work as "theology"? The theological method of many of these scholars is perhaps more like Abelard's spirit of doubt and questioning rather than Anselm's approach of "faith seeking understanding."

had little reason to work closely with Chinese Christians. Part of this is due to a perception that Chinese Christians have an inflexibility in their theology and do not have the academic rigor necessary for proper discourse. Moreover, such interaction may be dangerous for these scholars. From the Anti-Rightist Movement to the 1989 Tiananmen Square conflict, Chinese academics have learned to self-censor and not publish all that they truly believe. Scholars who engage house churches enter relationships with groups that operate illegally and inevitably deal with government-censored topics. Additionally, working too closely with the lianghui may pose questions about whether Sino-Christian theology should actually be administered by SARA rather than the Ministry of Education.

A Developing Situation

Since the 1980s, the lianghui has been the main guardian of ecumenism under the banner of a “post-denominational era.” In contrast, neither the house churches nor the “mystical” academics were interested in ecclesiastical unity. However, this would become much more complex in the next decades due to various sociopolitical factors.

After Tiananmen

In the 1980s, the first generation of scholars in Sino-Christian theology were in their twenties and thirties when China reopened and allowed them to be involved in the academic research of Christianity. Including individuals like Liu Xiaofeng and He Guanghu, these scholars received their primary and secondary education under the Maoist dogmatism of the Cultural Revolution and, later, found new freedoms to study Western ideas. Their encounter with Christianity was a serendipitous side-effect of their explorations into Western progress. Christianity was therefore an ideological resource to harvest for China's future.

But since the mid 1990s, a new crop of scholars in Sino-Christian theology has been developing. Unlike the earlier generation, these intellectuals began their primary and secondary education as the Cultural Revolution was coming to an end. He Guanghu explains that these younger scholars have had a more comprehensive education than his own generation; this has enabled them to better understand Western culture in their Christian research (2008:67). Rather than a peripheral interest, this foundation has provided the means for a deeper commitment to Christianity and theology. The resulting group consists of a larger percentage of Christian adherents than before. No longer would they self-describe themselves as members of the "mystical" church – they would be "Christian scholars," actively involved in local churches. However, is this the

whole picture? In many Western countries, a strong education in Western culture does not necessitate one's commitment to Christianity.

At this juncture, it is perhaps useful to highlight the developments of a group of well-educated, urban house church Christians since the 1990s.¹⁰ Scholars see this change in the church as responding to the 1989 student protests for democracy in Tiananmen Square (Sun 2007; Yang 2005:435-437). Many of these individuals were part of the protests but, in an atmosphere of failure, frustration and dismay, found greater meaning for their lives in Christianity. Moreover, as China initiated its "socialist market economy" in the 1990s, the anxieties accompanying consumerism, materialism and individualism have turned many to the faith (Yang 2005:431-435). A number of these newer Christians now work as academics and are members of the younger generation of scholars in Sino-Christian theology. While He Guanghu may be correct in describing these intellectuals as having a strong educational foundation in Western culture, it was through the birth pains of sociopolitical unrest that a new generation of Christians and Christian scholars was born.

These newer house churches have different reasons for not registering with the TSPM (Sun 2007). Some argue that the ordinances established by SARA

¹⁰ There seem to be at least two distinct groups of new house churches that have emerged since the 1990s. One group has grown in connection with socioeconomic prosperity of China's "socialist market economy" and given validity to Max Weber's thesis that there is a close affinity between capitalism and Protestantism (Bays 2003:500-502; Chen and Huang 2004). While there is some overlap in sociopolitical contexts, the focus here will be on a second group that has developed among intellectuals.

contradict the religious freedoms provided by China's laws and are therefore unconstitutional. Others have tried using their existence as a basis for constructive engagement with the government. If SARA ordinances and TSPM registration are unconstitutional, these churches hope to one day have legal existence in China without TSPM registration. They still maintain a theologically conservative outlook. But in contrast with the separatism and primitivism of other house church Christians, they tend to have a greater concern for theological reflection and social engagement.

These younger Christians attempt to live out Richard Niebuhr's "transformer" approach to the greater culture. Previously, they were involved in Tiananmen because they were committed to their country and society and wanted to see change. Now, their fervor for democracy and transformation has not waned but refocused. As Christians, they now desire to play a significant role in the public space and speak theologically into China's sociopolitical context. These congregations have only been around for the last two decades and do not have the same historical baggage as the older house churches. They are less motivated and compelled to operate in secret, better theologically equipped to engage other groups, and more actively advocating for legal registration.

Theological Reconstruction

How has this affected the ecumenical pursuits of the lianghui? For the most part, it has not changed much. Since the 1990s, the lianghui has focused on building partnerships with foreign Christians, hoping to be viewed as an equal – albeit, “younger” church.¹¹ The general approach of leaders of the official Protestant church has been to assert itself as the only Protestant church in China today. While the lianghui does acknowledge the presence of house churches, the tendency is to downplay their size and importance. The official church’s stance towards scholars in Sino-Christian theology has, however, been a bit different.

Ting has conceded that there is more theology occurring outside the church than within it today. Initially, he tried to partner with scholars of Sino-Christian theology. But due to an unwillingness of the various parties to work together, since 1998, Ting has been encouraging TSPM Christians of all disciplines to engage in a process of “theological reconstruction” (shenxue jianshe); his challenge was for believers to be involved in the development of a Chinese theology that would “adjust” Christianity to better “adapt” to socialism (Wickeri 2007:344). Many hoped that theological reconstruction would help the lianghui to unify the church and transform her theology to be less “backwards.”

¹¹ Since the 1990s, the CCC has had many exchanges with Western institutions and denominational bodies, became a member of the WCC and, in 2005, organized a Chinese Bible exhibition that appeared in three major cities of the United States.

However, there has yet to be much progress made by TSPM Christians on the theological front. Nanjing Seminary is the only CCC institution that offers any bachelors or masters degree – all other seminaries and training centers provide only diploma programs. Moreover, only a handful of church leaders and seminary professors have doctoral degrees. Though many theological articles have been produced in lianghui journals, perhaps the main person who has contributed any significant theological work has been Ting through his collection of over forty years worth of essays and speeches. This is not to say that one's curriculum vitae is the main judge of who can participate in theological work. It simply highlights the reality that many TSPM Christians find other matters more pressing than taking up the call of theological reconstruction. Some have embraced the initiative; others have ignored or rejected it, seeing Ting's own writings as departing from the theological core of the gospel (Wickeri 2007:352-366).

Interestingly, Ting's own attempts at theological reconstruction seem anachronistic, based on qualms he has had with fundamentalism since the time of Wang Mingdao. In one of his earliest speeches after the Cultural Revolution, Ting argues that an emphasis on the sinful nature denies a God of love. In contrast, God empathizes with Christians and non-Christians alike – both are “sinned against” because they suffer evils in this world and, using Maoist imagery, are oppressed by “imperialism, bureaucratic capitalism and feudalism”

(2000:45). He also argues that “justification by faith” emphasizes the anger and judgment of a God who limits love only to believers (2000:506-510). In contrast with a rigid conservatism, Ting aims for a flexible theology, able to bring together Christians and atheistic communists.

His theological reconstruction finds itself in a precarious position in terms of ecumenism. Ting wants to bridge the chasm between communists and Christians – a vital task for the church ever since 1949. He has hence constructed a theology and engaged in a political discourse to encourage Christianity’s existence in China and its role in building a “harmonious society,” to borrow a phrase from Hu Jintao. Despite the reservations one may have with the man, Ting has been instrumental in shaping important government legislation on religion (Wickeri 2007:211-215). He has been all things to all peoples – even to the communist (1 Corinthians 9:19-23).

Yet on the other hand, the bridges Ting has built with certain groups has resulted in the burning of bridges with others. He attacks doctrines like “original sin” and “justification by faith” foundational to the conservatism of Chinese churches and the work of many scholars in Sino-Christian theology.¹² The distant memory of the Cultural Revolution, the recent memory of the 1989 military clampdown and the current concerns raised by a “socialist market economy” have

¹² Scholars of Sino-Christian theology like Liu Xiaofeng, Zhuo Xinping, Yang Huilin and Zhang Qingxiong have written about original sin, guilt and repentance. They believe these themes are foreign to China but deserve a reexamination, potentially being useful under the current situation.

been reminders of the presence of evil in Chinese society. The theological categories he attacks are precisely the ones that offer hope and comfort to Chinese Christians. Lianghui leaders should perhaps not focus on adapting theology to socialism, but provide Christian solutions to China's societal problems. It is a serious question as to whether theological reconstruction has actually been more divisive than constructive to the ecumenical unity of a predominantly conservative Chinese church.

Ironically, there is an overlap in the concerns and objectives of lianghui leaders and the newer house church Christians. Both have interests in theological reflection, especially through a public theology. They desire more religious liberties and the possibility for Christianity to have a stronger voice in society. But this also means both groups are willing to engage others of different (a)religious dispositions and, ecumenically, with diverse theological views. The interest in theology and the transformation of society disposes the newer generation of house church Christians to possibilities in constructing a theology relevant to the sociopolitical context of China but without the anti-conservatism of Ting's theological reconstruction.

Ecumenism, Theology and China Today

Since Edinburgh 1910, Chinese Protestantism has experienced three major attempts at church unity. But the sociopolitical context of this period has left

deep memories in generations that endured foreign domination, military skirmishes and a thoroughgoing communist revolution. It comes at no surprise, then, that the ecumenical ventures of Chinese Protestantism have occurred within milieux of critique and rediscovery.

The future of ecumenism in China cannot succeed unless Christians are able to have intellectual discourses to understand and to clarify one another. This is very difficult within China when those conversations must occur between groups that have varying effective civil liberties due to their respective relationships with the government. Perhaps the scholars of Sino-Christian theology who are Christians have the best potential to cross the boundaries of various groups. Academic work already predisposes such individuals to the value of intellectual exchange. Also, many of these scholars may already be part of local TSPM churches or the newer house churches. If so, they provide the much needed public space that Christians in the TSPM and house churches do not normally have. They stand in an extremely strategic position to engage in conversations both in the greater society and within the Chinese church. The development of the Chinese church needs Christian academics to actively participate in dialogue to clarify and explore key theological concerns of different Christians in China.

Stemming from Edinburgh 1910, this article has focused on events involving Protestantism in China and has largely ignored Eastern Orthodoxy and

Catholicism. Historically, adherents to Orthodoxy in China have mainly consisted of Russian expatriates. While there are a handful of congregations that have survived beyond the Cultural Revolution, the Orthodox church is not officially recognized by the PRC. In contrast, Catholicism continues to have a large presence in China today, officially and unofficially, though is considered a separate religion from Protestantism. However, unlike Protestantism, the question of independence from foreign powers (namely, the Vatican) continues to plague Chinese Catholics today. A broader treatment of Chinese ecumenism and theology involving Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox communities is sorely lacking and warrants further research.

The diversity of the church is not limited to China but includes the greater context of world Christianity. Partnerships and ecumenical exchanges do exist with foreign Christians, but this has mainly been a oneway road where theology wends its way into China yet very little comes out. This is however a commentary on both those who produce the theology as well as those who wish to consume it. Perhaps one thing outsiders can gain from the Christian situation in China is the painstaking diligence of scholars in Sino-Christian theology to translate major theological texts into the Chinese language. By and large, there are very few people who are willing to do the same and make accessible the theological writings of Chinese thinkers into non-Chinese languages. As the Christian population in China continues to grow, translations and further research

into Chinese Christianity will be increasingly relevance for the global church. Particularly important are issues of church-state relations and the impact of social harmony and discord on theological reflections.

A word must be said about the inherent nature of Chinese theology as responding to its sociopolitical context. Philip Jenkins has argued that Christianity is shifting away from the North-Atlantic and towards Asia, Africa and Latin America. Like China, many of these regions were once dominated by oppressive powers and have in the last half century been able to critique and rediscover their self-understandings. The theologies of these “younger” churches will inevitably include responses to their respective sociopolitical contexts and may change over time. Although this is true of more seasoned theologies like Luther’s response to Medieval Catholicism, we do not often think of them in these terms. However, this challenges the nature of ecumenism as a whole. Is it merely bilateral and multilateral discussions across static denominations and geographies? Or should ecumenism be understood as a conversation within the communion of saints in contexts across space and time? World Christianity’s growing interest in theological reexamination poses challenges to global church unity, but also highlights the beauty of the gospel’s catholicity in all tribes and nations.

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